



the Science *of* Flourishing

Modern science is converging with age-held humanitarian notions of happiness, compassion and co-operation. Find out what you can do to operate on the higher end of human experience.

By Sally Mathrick

Ever wondered what it is that makes you feel powerful yet peaceful inside? Considered what transforms difficult situations into gratefully received challenges to rise to? Pondered what creates the disposition that results in negative influences are shed like water off a ducks' back? Wondered what it is that unlocks our inner happiness and contentment?

Plenty of people have wondered. For eons, mystics have developed frameworks of understanding and achieving happiness. Today, the scientific study of flourishing and happiness has become a focal point for research. It is primarily motivated by the ever-increasing incidence and economic cost of depression and other mental illnesses throughout the world. According to Dr Corey Keyes of Emory University, Atlanta, a staggering 50% of humans will experience a form of mental illness in their lifetime.

With preventative health being high on the aging world's agenda, we need to discover the best methods to prevent the development of mental illness. How better than to promote happiness and flourishing!

Martin Seligman, a pioneer in positive psychology, recognised that most happy people experienced high-quality friendships and were very comfortable being close with others.

Seven of the ten eudemonic signs identified by Corey Keyes (*see sidebar*) involve sharing or connecting with others. From the level of individual communities, all the way to the global level, trends are showing an increase in feelings of isolation, particularly in the USA. Simultaneously, there's a decrease trend in trusting others, especially in the UK. The negative effects of feelings of isolation do contribute to poor health on many levels.



“Individual happiness
can contribute in
a profound and
effective way to the
overall improvement
of our entire human
community.”
- Dalai Lama

Positive Points

Connecting and interacting with people is only one part of the story. Interactions need to have positive elements and aspects, according to researchers Barbara Fredrickson and Marcial Losada, from Michigan University.

Negatively charged exchanges and experiences stimulate the stress responses in the body/mind. From an evolutionary perspective, this “fight or flight” response, closes us down emotionally in readiness to defend ourselves. This defensiveness causes a narrowing in our responses. Such restriction can lead to a polarised black and white “us or them” or a “good or bad” way of thinking, which are limiting.

The evidence shows that positive emotions provide multiple, interrelated benefits, mentally, physically and socially. Positive feelings widen our attention and open us to more approaches and consider new alternatives – or in the words of the researchers: “positive experience broadens thought-action repertoires”.

This broadening creates lasting personal and social resources—tools, ideas, experiences, understandings and social networks, which contribute to greater resilience in times of adversity. So, the research suggests, having a good amount of positive interaction allows you to think outside the polarised “fight or flight” box, the next time a modern day monster crosses your path.

The magic ratio of positive to negative experiences for human flourishing in the work place is 3:1. This ratio creates more work efficacy, more creativity and satisfaction. Intimate relationships however, require a 6:1 positive to negative ratio in order to flourish. And appropriate, genuine positive

emotions are the key ingredient. No faking it.
Positive responses that are false or not genuine just
don't have the same effect.

Appropriate Negativity

Too much positive emotion has been shown to thwart flourishing. The upper limit ratio was recognised as 11.6:1 positive to negative experiences. Appropriate negativity is a great motivator for positive change, and can be constructively utilised to create more positive growth and development in an individual or groups' life experience.

There is a degree of normality to negative emotions such as frustration, dissatisfaction, sadness or dislike, suggests Dr Tim Sharp, Chief Happiness Officer of The Happiness Institute in Sydney.

Integral psychologist Ken Wilber suggests that, “suffering smashes to pieces the complacency of our normal fictions about reality and forces us to become alive in a special sense.”

Feeling and experiencing our resistance or negatively charged emotions straight up, without undue dramatisation, acknowledging their existence and then using them, as an impetus to create a better experience, is the way of flourishing. This ‘keeping it real’ approach provides access to direct experience of the moment, rather than experiences filtered by expectation and conditioning. Eckhart Tolle, author of “The Power of Now”, is likely to agree.



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Cause For Compassion

Flourishing is at the higher end of the human experience. It requires compassion and understanding for self and others to be truly ingrained in life.

Sonja Lyubomirsky from the University of California ran a trial whereby participants would perform 5 random acts of kindness a day a week, for 5 weeks. Acts included opening doors for strangers, putting coins in other people's expired meters, paying-it-forward in cafes (where by you pay for your coffee and the next person's as well) and so on. By the end of the 5 weeks, there was a significant increase in levels of personal happiness of the participants, suggesting that helping others can lead to greater personal happiness.

Another research study in the USA boosted participants moods, by allowing them to find money in a phone booth, and provided them an opportunity to help someone, by having a stranger drop things nearby. Participants receiving the boost were more likely to help the stranger, than the control participants who didn't find any money. Conclusions were that helping others makes you happy and people who are happy are more likely to help others.

So it's a gentle cycle of happiness and helping, as opposed to a viscous cycle of sadness and isolation, that elevates us to a place of grace and ease. It's comforting and encouraging that scientists are now proving long held humanitarian notions of interconnectedness and compassion. Let's hope it filters throughout the mainstream quickly.



Dr Corey Keyes and his team in the USA researched to establish what creates flourishing and happiness in an individual's life. Dr Corey Keyes, presenting at "Happiness and its Causes conference" Sydney 2007, said his research concluded that only 17% of adults in the USA were flourishing. This means 83% of American adults will be more likely to develop chronic illness, be less productive and less successful in their work, and be more likely to experience feelings of helplessness.

KEYES'S TEAM CATEGORISED HAPPINESS INTO 2 TYPES;

- Hedonism = pleasure is the highest good and proper aim in human life (feeling good)
- Eudemonism = good actions will produce happiness (doing good)

SIGNS OF EUDEMONISM:

Tick the signs you strongly recognise in your own life:

- Being integrated into a group
- Being a part of growth and development
- Being accepting of others
- Having social interest
- Contributing to society
- Mastering your environment
- Accepting the self
- Involvement in positive relations
- Experiencing personal growth
- Autonomy and having purpose in life

SIGNS OF HEDONISM:

- Feeling satisfied
- Having positive effect to a high level in your life

Keyes' group granted the status of flourishing when a minimum of six eudemonic signs and one hedonic sign were selected. Anything less than this, indicates languishing.